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SUBJECT: HASINA GIVES GOVERNMENT 120 DAYS TO HOLD ELECTIONS

REF: DHAKA 0244

Classified By: Amb. Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Sheikh Hasina says the interim government has 120 days -- the constitutional duration of the state of emergency -- to hold elections and prevent her supporters from hitting the streets. She dismissed rumors of her imminent self-exile and the political potential of Nobel prize laureate Mohammad Yunus. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On February 13, Ambassador and POLOFF (note taker) met with Awami League president Sheikh Hasina. Also in attendance were Hasina's Political Secretary, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Presidium member Kazi Zafarullah, former ambassador Ziauddin Ahmed, and party International Affairs Secretary Syed Abul Hossain.

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¶3. (C) Hasina criticized the arrests of Awami League figures, comparing them to the "false arrests" of her supporters during the government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. However, she praised the arrests of truly corrupt people, and noted that "if we had done this we would have been accused of politics, but this government can take such actions."

¶4. (C) Hasina stated she has no plans to leave Bangladesh. "Why should I leave my country?" she asked. "I've done nothing wrong." She insisted no one in the government or military has asked her to leave, and that she is staying put. She also said she is being careful, though, because she knows one false move could become a pretext for government action against her.

¶5. (C) She dismissed the political appeal or potential of Nobel prize laureate Mohammad Yunus. She commented that maybe she, too, should have made billions first, then entered politics, but for the past 40 years she was busy "serving the people." She denied the Awami League needs internal reform, but complained that, because of the former ruling party's abuse of power, some people unfairly castigate politicians, including the Awami League.

¶6. (C) Hasina privately told Ambassador the Awami League would give the caretaker government 120 days -- the constitutional duration of the January 11 state of emergency -- to organize and hold elections. If elections were not held by then, she threatened, her supporters would hit the streets in protest. For the moment, though, Hasina says she is prepared to give the government time because "our movement started this government, so we still want to see it succeed."

¶7. (C) Ambassador asked Hasina about rumors that the Pakistani High Commissioner had been working behind the

scenes to encourage the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party to unite to agitate for early elections. Hasina did not respond.

¶ 8. (C) Comment. Hasina's threat to hit the streets so soon -- possibly taking advantage of popular unrest associated with price hikes or power shortages -- is worrisome since it could plunge the country into new violence and crisis. While it could be bluster to use the only real leverage she now has, the Awami League's well-established penchant for agitation and "people power" cannot be ruled out. Hasina's assertive stance contrasts sharply with Khaleda Zia's subdued mood two days ago (reftel). However, if Hasina really believes that Bangladeshis don't see both major parties as epicenters of greed and self-interest, and that her party needs no reforms to prosper in post-1/11 Bangladesh, then she has already exiled herself, at least from reality. End Comment.

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